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CUBA INDEPENDENCE AND UNITED STATES

INTERVENTION

By Ronnie Leslie

History 351 1:00-2:50 MW

Rector

As the nineteenth century came to a close, Spain's position as one of the world powers had been slipping away. By the late nineteenth century the nation left only a few scattered possessions in the Pacific, Africa and the West Indies. Between 1776 and 1825, as most of the colonies of North and South America acquired their independence, Cuba remained a loyalist stronghold. Following the liberation from Spain of mainland Latin America, Cuba was the first to initiate its own struggle for independence. That war concluded with the Pact of Zanjón that was never enforced by the Spanish. However, in the 1890's Cubans began to revolt once again for their independence from Spain, in which the United States eventually became militarily involved. Their involvement was to help further their chances to achieve ownership of the island due to its location and wonderful resources that it had to offer. To what is to be known as the Spanish-American war, the United States was victorious and became an expansionist world power, and the Cubans just fermented for their chance of independence. The Americans took most of the credit in the defeat against the Spanish, even though the Cubans did most of the decisive battle.

Constant efforts by Cubans during the last fifteen years to achieve reform within the Spanish system had failed¹. Spanish imposition of more taxes and trade restrictions as well as support to reforms, pushed the economically distressed Cubans, and in February 1895 launched the Cuban War of Independence. However, this war was different from other Cuban revolts in the past because this time the Cubans were united with Maximo Gomez, Antonio Maceo, and Jose Marti. The moral leader of this struggle

¹ Thomas, Hugh. Cuba The Pursuit of Freedom. New York, 1971

was Jose Marti, who is considered an apostle to the Cubans, and who established the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892 in the United States. Marti devoted his life to ending colonial rule in Cuba and to preventing the island from falling under control of any country whose political ideologies were unfavorable to the principles he held even the United States². Marti later returned to Cuba and participated in the first weeks of armed combat when he was killed in 1895. After Marti's death, the leadership of the war fell to Gomez and Maceo who in reality defeated the Spanish. Spanish authorities refused to concede colonial reforms as long as Cubans remained in arms, and Cubans refused to relinquish their arms for reforms that did not end colonialism³. What began as little skirmishes, developed into a full scale war of thousands of battle ready revolutionaries. By January 1896, rebel forces controlled most of the island of Cuba, which continued into a struggle between the Creole elites and other Cuban landowners over the domination of the colony. With lack of resources, Spain was fighting a losing war, and even many of the Cuban rebels, and the United States already assumed the war was coming to a close. By late 1887, the Spanish government was declining due to riots, anti-war demonstrations, and lack of resources became unbearable for the Spanish government⁴.

Until 1896, the conflict was mostly a struggle between the colony and city over competing claims of sovereignty over Cuba. The Spanish effort to come to peace was going nowhere, even with General Weyler implement of "reconstruction" program (concentration camps). With no military end to the conflict in sight, and economic conditions continuing to deteriorate, the foundations of Spain's small political base in

² Cuba a Country Study. The Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. Washington DC, 2002.

³ Perez, Jr. Louis A. Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution. Oxford University Press, 1988.

⁴ Perez Jr., Louis A. Between Meanings and Memories of 1898. "Orbis" vol. 42 (1998): 501, 16.

Cuba began to crack under the strain³. With the implement of the McKinley Tariff act of 1890, which placed raw sugar on the free list, led to an increase on Cuban American trade and especially to the expansion of sugar production. By 1894, less than 20% of sugar mill owners in Cuba were Cubans, and more than 95% of all Cuban sugar exports went to the U.S⁵. The Cuban elites who sought union with the United States prior to the revolt, in 1887 had good reason too, because the U.S. would provide a good market in exports and imports of sugar, tobacco, and a powerful ally. The U.S. had millions of dollars invested in sugar plantations in Cuba, and they forced sugar tariff on beet sugar allowing the economy of sugar in Cuba to rise.

U.S interest in Cuba began with Guerrilla destruction of sugar farms. The U.S. government was not pleased to discover the heavy losses of American investment in Cuba, plus the island was too great importance to the U.S. because of the strategic position between Central America and their future plans for the Panama Canal. American Cuban policy in the years leading up to the Spanish-American war had two administrations, one democratic, one Republican which pursued a foreign policy toward Cuba that was non-interventionist and extremely conservative⁶. The policy had no substantial popular support in the United States, Cuba or Spain. By 1898, Cuba was lost to Spain, and if the U.S. government did not act, Cuba would also be lost to the United States. The U.S. had been interested in purchasing Cuba long before the Spanish-American war because of it geologic position and investments. Early in the nineteenth century, and all through the nineteenth century, Cuba loomed large in American thinking

⁵ Cuba a Country Study. The Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. Washington DC, 2002.

⁶ Thomas, Hugh. Cuba The Pursuit of Freedom. New York, 1971

on national security to the point that the idea of national integration would seem to remain incomplete without Cuba⁷. Furthermore, the sympathy for the Cuban insurgents ran high in America, especially after the Ten years war, and the establishment of concentration camps formed by Weyler in 1896. Although the majority of Americans, including President McKinley, wished to avert war and hoped to settle the Cuban question by peaceful means, this did not happen. Two events in early 1898 helped justify U.S. involvement, the publication of a stolen private letter from Dupuy de Lome to a friend in Havana characterizing McKinley as a weak little man, and the sinking of the U.S.S Maine. With the alleged sinking of the U.S. battleship Maine, and the de Lome letter, the U.S. forced itself into the Spanish-American war. The United States wanted intervention, and the populous was aroused by stories of Spanish Cruelty blown out of proportion by irresponsible "Yellow Journalists", W.R. Hearst, and Pilstner⁸. So it was that on April 11, 1898 President McKinley requested Congress authority to intervene militarily in Cuba⁹. Yet before war, the United States offered 300,000 million to purchase the island of Cuba, but was deposed. One of the most influential elements bringing about a war between Spain and the United States was the press, which kept Cuba in the minds of the population from the outbreak of the rebellion in 1895 and fanned popular animosity towards Spain¹⁰.

When the three year Cuban struggle seemed on the verge of triumph, the Americans intervened and claimed full credit for the defeat of Spain¹⁰. Even though

⁷ Perez Jr., Louis A. Between Meanings and Memories of 1898. "Orbis" vol. 42 (1998): 501, 16.

⁸ Thomas, Hugh. Cuba The Pursuit of Freedom. New York, 1971

⁹ Thomas, Hugh. Cuba The Pursuit of Freedom. New York, 1971

¹⁰ Tarrago, Rafael E. The Thwarting of Cuban Autonomy. "Orbis" vol.42 (1998): 517, 15.

McKinley stated that the purpose for intervention was a way to stop the war, which it did, it also gave the U.S. direct control of Cuba. When President McKinley addressed congress on April 11, he mentioned no word of Cuban independence, provisional government, or a free Cuba, just permission for intervention. The intervention of the United States in the war developed into war against the Spanish and Cubans, as a means to legitimize the claim of sovereignty to the United States¹¹. The United States misuse of taking credit of the Spanish American war worked to their advantage to weaken the Cuban claim to independence. The major purpose of U.S. intervention in 1898 was accomplished in 1901 by the Platt Amendment and the Teller Amendment. The Teller Amendment pledged the United States to support an independent Cuba. Cuban leaders complained that Cuba was not part of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the war, because their soldiers had been excluded from the conflict by the United States Army, and despite innumerable sacrifice independence still loomed more as hope than a reality¹². To damage Cuban morale further, the Platt Amendment was implemented, which stipulated the right of the United States to intervene in Cuba's international affairs and to leave a naval base in Cuba¹³. The Cuban republic was angry at the United States policy, which deemed most likely to jeopardize its influence. Without minimizing the bitterness of the Cuban popular classes against Spanish rule, or the fact that the bravery of the Cuban guerrillas who fought the best troops of the Spanish empire. The plain fact here is that the United States and Spain set the terms of Cuban independence¹⁴.

¹¹ Tarrago, Rafael E. The Thwarting of Cuban Autonomy. "Orbis" vol.42 (1998): 517, 15.

¹² Thomas, Hugh. Cuba The Pursuit of Freedom. New York, 1971

¹³ Cuba a Country Study. The Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. Washington DC, 2002.

¹⁴ Horowitz, Irving Louis. One Hundred Years of Ambiguity: U.S-Cuba Relations in the 20th Century. "National Interest" Issue 67 (2002): 58, 7.

The government of Cuba in the 20th century operated in the shadow of the United States. On account of the Platt Amendment, from 1902 to 1933 Cuba and the United States were engaged in an imperial relationship which polarized politics on the island, limited the autonomy of its power centers, and because the threat of requesting U.S. intervention was successful enough to become a political resource for those out of power, had the unintended effect of increasing political uncertainty¹⁵. It's not that the Cubans were capable of running their own government; it was that the American's didn't think they were smart enough to do it. The Cuban flag did not fly over Havana until May 20, 1902, when U.S. supported Tomas Estrada Palma was sworn in as the first President of the Republic of Cuba. Palma was an avid proponent of U.S. annexation, and many Cubans were disillusioned by his appointment, and to further push tempers, the U.S. in 1903 declared a Treaty of Reciprocity that would rent out Guantomano Bay¹⁶. This treaty still stands to this day, with the United States paying two thousand dollars a year to keep it in their hands. The only way to terminate the treaty would be for the United States to agree, which will most likely not happen in my life time. When independence finally arrived, in 1902, Cubans discovered that old grievances had assumed new forms. Cubans had achieved self-government without self-determination and independence without sovereignty¹⁷.

The Spanish-American war revealed that industrialization in the late 19th century had made the U.S. a great power. Regardless of the reasons behind the annexation, the Spanish-American war and the colonies it brought to the U.S. market, for good and bad

¹⁵ Tarrago, Rafael E. The Thwarting of Cuban Autonomy. "Orbis" vol.42 (1998): 517, 15.

¹⁶ Thomas, Hugh. Cuba The Pursuit of Freedom. New York, 1971

¹⁷ Perez, Jr. Louis A. Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution. Oxford University Press, 1988.

reasons, marked the modern era of U.S. intervention in Latin America. In general the relations between Americans and Spaniards in Cuba were excellent, while those between Cubans and Americans were almost invariably bad. American military government was immediately proclaimed in Cuba, with General John R Brooke as commander, Marti's revolutionary government was never allowed to take control. In 1899 the Cubans had won their independence, but were not allowed to parade their troops through the capital, or put up their flag.

The wars for independence that followed the Cubans lasted more than thirty years, from 1868 until the outbreak of the Spanish-American war, followed by the intervention of the United States in 1898. As the Cuban economy became more closely linked with that of the United States, sugar estates and mining interest passed from Spanish and Cuba to U.S. hands. Without the influence of Jose Marti and his united independence movement, Cuba would not have had such an impact against the Spanish. The Spanish were holding onto a colony that it could not gain control of, thus Cuban pushed their way towards independence. The interest in Cuba by the U.S. population was due to "Yellow Journalism" which influences their intervention in 1898. Even though the Cubans despised U.S. intervention they had no choice but to comply. The Spanish-American war only lasted four months, but it gave the United States the opportunity to take control of the island of Cuba. The Spanish-American war is known to many historians as Americas establishment as an imperialist. The Causes of the Spanish-American war developed slowly and was fed with many fuels, but in my own opinion the United States swindled Cuba's independence movement by taking all the credit in defeating the Spanish. The Claims the Americans used to intervene in the struggle

consisted of U.S. investment, sinking of the Maine, the de Lome letter, and the strategic position of the island. Thus, the Cuban independence movements, not only gave the U.S the dominate position in the world, but it gave the future of Cuba the “Fire” that finalized their soul independence as a nation under Fidel Castro.

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